

Work Schedules of Low-Educated American Women and Welfare Reform

In 1996, the President signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, initiating a major reform of the U.S. welfare system. One of the main objectives of welfare reform was to move mothers permanently from welfare to employment. It has been estimated that 10 to 20 percent of nonemployed American mothers with young children do not seek employment because of child care availability and affordability problems. In one study of mothers who received Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), 60 percent reported that a lack of child care prevented them from participating in work programs.

This article examines the work schedules of low-educated employed mothers in the United States in an effort to clarify who are most likely to be successful in the welfare-to-work transition. Findings indicate that less educated mothers are more likely to work a nonstandard schedule than are other women; the main reason they work such schedules relates to the occupations in which they work; and these are the occupations that are expected to grow in the future. Because formal day care is less available at nonstandard times, the implication is that if low-educated women on welfare are to be encouraged to take jobs similar to those of other low-educated women, their “off-hours” child care needs will have to be addressed.

Data and the Sample

Data were from the May 1991 Current Population Survey (CPS). The CPS is a nationally representative monthly survey conducted by the U.S. Bureau of the Census. The May 1991 CPS included a supplement with questions on work schedules for all first and second jobs.

The sample for this study included all civilian women ages 18 to 34 with a high school education or less, with at least one child under age 14, who had at least one job for pay the previous week, and whose primary job (the one in which they worked the most hours) was in a nonagricultural occupation. There were 2,862 women with these characteristics.

Nonstandard Work Schedule

Persons who worked fixed day schedules Monday through Friday during the week before the interview were considered to have a standard work schedule. Those who work irregular hours, irregular days, rotating hours or days, weekend days, and regular evening or night hours were regarded as having a nonstandard work schedule.

Whereas 62 percent of all employed women work fixed daytime, weekdays only schedules, only 57 percent of low-educated employed women, ages 18 to 34 with children under age 14, reported being on this “standard schedule.”

Occupations and Work Schedules

A major determinant of standard versus nonstandard work schedules is occupation. Many of the service occupations show relatively high percentages of evening, nighttime, and weekend work. The service sector is growing because of the increasing employment of women and the aging of the population. As more and more women are employed during the day-time, demand for nighttime and weekend services increases to accommodate shoppers, dining out, and the purchase of other homemaking services formerly done by full-time homemakers. Dual-earner couples have increased the demand for recreation and entertainment during evenings, nights, and weekends. Also, the aging of the population has increased the demand for medical services over a 24-hour day, 7-day week.

Among women in the sample who were working in the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th most common occupations—cashiers, nursing aides, and waitresses—at least 40 percent work nonstandard hours and nonstandard days. (The most common occupation was secretaries; few in this occupation worked a nonstandard schedule.)

Work Schedules and Child Care

Women with preschool-age children are almost 1½ times more likely to work nonstandard hours than are women without children; women with school-age children are only nine-tenths as likely to work such hours as are childless women. Mothers of preschool-age children may be working a nonstandard schedule to accommodate their child care needs.

Previous studies have found that when two-earner married couples work different shifts, virtually all fathers are the principle providers of child care when mothers are employed. But, among low-educated single mothers, problems of child care availability constrain women's employment—without regard to their work schedule.

Why Women With Children Work Other Than a Fixed Day Shift

When *all* women ages 18 to 34 with children under age 14 were compared with *only* those with a high school education or less, there was little difference in the percentages for both groups—suggesting that education is not a significant explanation as to why women work nonstandard hours. If only low-educated mothers are analyzed, 31 percent of those with children under age 5 compared with 18 percent of those with children between 5 and 13 report “better child care arrangements” as their main reason for working nonstandard hours.

A higher percentage of married (31 percent) than unmarried mothers (19 percent) said “better child care” was their main reason for working nonstandard hours. This implies that the spouse shares child care responsibilities. The most frequent reason reported—especially by women with school-age children and by unmarried mothers—was that it was a “requirement of the job.” For all low-educated mothers, 46 percent said either they could not get another job or it was a requirement of the job to work nonstandard hours. Thus, it may be concluded that many low-educated mothers regard such employment as an accommodation to labor market needs and not as a personal preference.

Personal Characteristics of Low-Educated Mothers Under Age 35 Who Work Nonstandard Schedules

Marriage for low-educated mothers significantly decreases the likelihood of working nonstandard hours and/or nonstandard days. In contrast, having more than one child and having a child under age 5 increase the likelihood of working nonstandard schedules among these women. Compared with Whites, those who are Black, Hispanic, or “other” are less likely to work both nonstandard hours and nonstandard days. Those who work less than 35 hours a week are two to three times as likely to work a nonstandard schedule as those who work full time.

Implications for Welfare Reform

Both family and job characteristics are important predictors of nonstandard employment schedules for low-educated mothers under age 35. These women are concentrated in some of the jobs projected to grow the most by 2005; these same occupations have high percentages working either nonstandard hours, days, or both (e.g., 91 percent of waiters and waitresses, 88 percent of home health aides, 82 percent of cashiers, and 76 percent of retail salespersons). Therefore, many of the jobs available for mothers moving from welfare to paid work will be from these types of occupations and will entail working nonstandard schedules.

Results of this study indicate that (1) low-educated mothers are disproportionately represented in occupations with high rates of nonstandard schedules; (2) many of these women who work nonstandard hours do so primarily for labor market rather than personal reasons; and (3) job characteristics are stronger determinants of employment during nonstandard times than are family characteristics. Thus, low-educated mothers appear drawn into working nonstandard hours by a lack of options. Because this situation is likely to continue—even increase—given current occupational projections, child care will need to be expanded during nonstandard times, including evenings and weekends if mothers on welfare are to succeed in the job market.

Presser, H. B. and Cox, A.G., 1997, The work schedules of low-educated American women and welfare reform, *Monthly Labor Review* 120(4):25-34.